

Global History of Terrorism Archive (GHTA)

What is the Global History of Terrorism Archive?

The Global History of Terrorism Archive (GHTA) is a vast collection of press reports on the content and context of political violence around the world. Its 1,564 files offer particularly detailed coverage of the period c.1979-1993.

What is the Research Value of the Archive?

The Global History of Terrorism constitutes an in-depth record of terrorism, political violence and civil war during the last years of the Cold War, and its immediate aftermath. Unsurprisingly, this highly turbulent period saw its fair share of terrorist and revolutionary violence. In 1979, the Iranian Revolution broke out, launching waves of Islamist unrest that are still ongoing. In 1994, the Zapatista Revolt erupted in Chiapas, Mexico. The Zapatistas were remarkable for their pioneering use of the internet. Between these two watershed events the archive is at its most impressive (although there is also some more limited coverage of the late 1970s as well).

Some of this open-source material can be found online. (An impressionistic estimate suggests the area of overlap to be about 60%). But there is still much material here that could not be so easily sourced online. Moreover, one of the strengths of the collection is simply its physical concentration of diverse sources in one place. Browsing at length through pre-gathered reports allows a much deeper immersion in the source material than browsing by keyword in an online data base. Some intense conflicts are particularly well-reported: and major incidents here might be covered by several different reports. Those sections of the archive offer a deep sense of atmosphere and background tension: what anthropologists call ‘thick description’. Such deep coverage also allows for rich comparison between different media cultures and their divergent emphases.

Overall, though, the archive reflects a decidedly Western or ‘Global North’ view of risk management priorities around the world in the late 20th century. This is hardly surprising: the overwhelming majority of the reports are from UK, US and Western European newspapers and wire services. As such, some regions that were to dominate the geo-politics of the 21st century are surprisingly lightly surveyed. East Asia is a case in point. Only 15 files are devoted to China. Only 2 are devoted to North Korea.

Lastly, the archive offers a cultural snapshot of the news business on the eve of the internet revolution. In an age before camera phones and social media the flow of public information was structured from the top-down. Major western newspapers maintained permanent staff in likely trouble-spots and locations deemed important to their readers: these correspondents, and their editors, were the gate-keepers of public information. What they deemed important supplied what the public read about over their breakfasts. And what they considered unimportant, or simply missed, effectively never happened: at least as far as global visibility and debate were concerned. As such, the collection is a useful reminder of the deep unfamiliarity of the recent past.

History of the Archive

The archive was developed to support the specialist consultancy service, Control Risks (founded 1975). As a director of Control Risks, and pioneer of the academic study of terrorism, Major-General Richard Clutterbuck (1917-1998) appears to have been the driving force behind the creation of the archive. In 1998 the archive was bequeathed to Paul Wilkinson, Director of the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV) at the University of St Andrews. By 2010, it was no longer used: and narrowly escaped going into a skip. It took another ten years for CSTPV to assemble the resources to secure its long-term future. Special Collections at the University of St Andrews provided the specialist guidance on compiling a catalogue (see below). A very generous donation by John and Yasemin Vickery of California allowed CSTPV to hire a dedicated team of student interns finally to complete this task in 2020-1.

Nature of Content

We do not know the specific collection guidelines. But the archive's general purpose is clear enough. It was a commercial research project to support information and advice services on risk management for the Anglophone business community. It thus reflects their perceived interests. Although there is a core focus on terrorism and related phenomena such as political violence, civil war and state repression, wider socio-economic contexts are not neglected. Natural disasters, epidemics, inflation, industrial disputes and major political controversies thus all take their place as background. There is also a considerable amount of miscellaneous supplementary material: risk reports, researchers' notes, briefing sheets from various sources and occasional lists of incidents.

Most of the news reports are from major international dailies (and wire services) based in North America and Western Europe. English-language sources dominate: although there is also good coverage from the major European newspapers in French, German, Spanish and Italian. Many of these reports are accompanied by translations into English.

Scope of Coverage

Even a cursory survey of the news coverage in the archive reveals its pretensions to offer a global record. All regions of the world are represented, albeit unevenly in both quality and quantity. Counting the number of ring-binder files allows some view of the overall spread of the archive. Using the same regional breakdown that is used by the renowned Global Terrorism Database (GTD) its content seems to be distributed as follows:

Australasia/Oceania: 0.8%
Central America and the Caribbean: 16%
Central Asia: 0.2%
East Asia: 3.7%
Eastern Europe (i.e. from Poland east, incl. Balkans, Caucasus): 3%
Middle East and North Africa: 21%
North America: 2%
South America: 11%
South Asia: 3.5%
Southeast Asia: 5%
Sub-Saharan Africa: 14%
Western Europe: 15%

This overview is rough-and-ready. But it is clear enough to reveal some structural outlines. Regions where civil wars raged in the 1980s are particularly covered: Central America, Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa. Since the bulk of the collection relates to the late Cold War rather than its aftermath, the widespread chaos that broke out after the collapse of the Soviet Union is not enough to change the overall balance of coverage away from those regions. ‘Eastern’ Europe – i.e. east of Germany, including the Balkans and Caucasus in GTD’s schema – is much less closely scrutinised. Although there is useful material on the gathering crisis in Yugoslavia until the end of 1991, the Yugoslav Wars of Dissolution (1992-95) are not covered at all. Conversely, Western Europe is densely reported (despite the Scandinavian countries being treated in a single file group). Despite the absence of civil wars here, the sustained terrorist campaigns of the period are very well covered.

Organization of the Archive

The structure of the archive reflects the incremental logic of its compilation. It consists of 139 file groups. No less than 136 of these are organized solely by reference to geographical location. Another 2 file groups (both with 9 files each) have a focus on the Middle East, but are organized more thematically. The first is devoted to the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). The second covers the Gulf War of 1990-1. Only one file group adopts a genuinely transnational approach: ‘Terrorism General’ consists of 48 files.

Single countries are by far the most common unit of organization. 116 file groups are organized according to this model. To give just one representative example: Guatemala is covered by 19 files that run consecutively from c. 1977 to May 1992. Reports within each of these files appear in strict chronological order by date. It is worth noting that the early 1990s saw the emergence of many new states. File group organization reflects these changes. Thus, material relating to Russia is found in the file group relating to the USSR [i.e. Soviet Union] before its collapse in 1991. But Russia then receives its own dedicated file group for 1992-1994.

State collapse and new state formation aside, the delineation by individual countries usually is clear enough. A couple of anomalies are, however, worth noting –the Austria file contains significant material relating to Switzerland: and there are a couple of country pairings as well (USA/Canada and Burundi/Rwanda). Some relevant material relating to individual countries may also be found in regional file groupings as well (see below).

Some file groups take a wider focus to cover a whole region. There are 20 of these, namely: Gulf States; Middle East General; Scandinavia; General Europe; Baltic States; Eastern European General; Central Asia; Pacific; Africa General; Africa Islands; Horn and East Africa; Southern Africa; West Africa; Far East; Caribbean General; English-Speaking Caribbean; French -Speaking Caribbean; Central America General; South America General; and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). This last group (of 3 files) contains material from: Russia, Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Generally, the bulk of detailed news reports belong to the 1979 -1993 period. Occasionally, extraneous material is included from significantly before, and after, those dates. Some background material seems to focus upon the 1977-1979 period; coverage then become more sustained and detailed from about 1979 onwards. It is not entirely clear why. Likewise, why the material peters out so unevenly for different countries is also unclear. End dates generally occur in the early 1990s.

Although the general continuity of coverage is impressive, it is not without a few puzzling gaps. Coverage of Jordan (6 files) begins as late as 1986, for instance. Such absences suggest that the archive may not be fully complete. Conversely, a small amount of material seems to have found its way into the archive subsequently: such as that relating to the Democratic Republic of Congo in the years 1999-2002 (which is long after regular collection had clearly ceased). However, the big picture remains that such irregularities are relatively few and far between. Overall, there seems little reason to doubt that the archive is substantially intact and largely retains its original shape and composition.

Full list of File Groups (with the number of files in each):

Middle East and North Africa

1. Algeria (12 files)
2. Egypt (17 files)
3. Gulf States (17 files)
4. Gulf War (9 files)
5. Israel (46 files)
6. Iran (39 files)
7. Iraq (28 files)
8. Iraqi Kuwait [i.e during 1990-91 occupation] (13 files)
9. Jordan (6 files)
10. Kuwait (2 files)
11. Lebanon (37 files)
12. Libya (14 files)
13. Morocco (14 files)
14. PLO [Palestine Liberation Organisation] (9 files)
15. Saudi Arabia (11 files)
16. Syria (6 files)
17. Tunisia (5 files)
18. Turkey (25 files)
19. Yemen (5 files)
20. Middle East General (6 files)

Europe

21. Austria (1 file)
22. Belgium (7 files)
23. Cyprus (2 files)
24. France (23 files)
25. Germany [i.e. West Germany until 1990; reunified Germany thereafter] (39 files)
26. Greece (13 files)
27. Great Britain (20 files)
28. Northern Ireland (23 files)
29. Ireland (10 files)
30. Italy (30 files)
31. Malta (1 file)
32. Netherlands (5 files)
33. Portugal (4 files)
34. Scandinavia (7 files)
35. Spain (39 files)
36. Switzerland (5 files)
37. General Europe (5 files)

Eastern Europe

38. Albania (1 file)
39. Baltic States (2 files)

40. Bulgaria (1 file)
41. CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States] (3 files)
42. Czechoslovakia (4 files)
43. East Germany (2 files)
44. Hungary (1 file)
45. Poland (7 files)
46. Romania (3 files)
47. Russia (5 files)
48. USSR [Soviet Union] (13 files)
49. Yugoslavia (1 file)
50. Eastern Europe (2 files)

Central Asia

51. Armenia (1 file)
52. Central Asia (2 files)

Oceania

53. Australia (3 files)
54. Fiji (1 file)
55. New Caledonia (1 file)
56. New Zealand (3 files)
57. Pacific (2 files)
58. Papua New Guinea (2 files)

South Asia

59. Afghanistan (5 files)
60. Bangladesh (2 files)
61. India (28 files)
62. Pakistan (6 files)
63. Sri Lanka (13 files)

North America

64. USA (2 files)
65. USA/Canada (8 files)
66. Canada (2 files)
67. Mexico (21 files)

East Asia

68. China (15 files)
69. Hong Kong (7 files)
70. Japan (13 files)
71. Mongolia (1 file)
72. South Korea (14 files)
73. North Korea (2 files)
74. Taiwan (4 files)

Sub-Saharan Africa

75. Africa General (33 files)
76. African Islands (1 file)
77. Angola (12 files)
78. Benin to Cote d'Ivoire (2 files)
79. Burundi/Rwanda (1 file)
80. Central Africa (3 files)
81. Democratic Republic of Congo (5 files)
82. Ethiopia (4 files)
83. Ghana (3 files)
84. Horn and East Africa (5 files)
85. Kenya (13 files)
86. Liberia (7 files)
87. Mozambique (11 files)
88. Namibia (5 files)
89. Niger (1 file)
90. Nigeria (13 files)
91. Somalia (4 files)
92. South Africa (53 files)
93. Southern Africa (2 files)
94. Sudan (16 files)
95. Tanzania (1 file)
96. Uganda (4 files)
97. West Africa (4 files)
98. Zambia (4 files)
99. Zimbabwe (9 files)

South East Asia

100. Cambodia (4 files)
101. East Timor (1 file)
102. Indonesia (10 files)
103. Malaysia (7 files)
104. Philippines (28 files)
105. Singapore (4 files)
106. Thailand (11 files)
107. Vietnam (5 files)
108. Far East (3 files)

General

109. Terrorism General (48 files)

Central America and Caribbean

110. Belize (1 file)
111. Caribbean General (17 files)
112. Central America General (12 files)
113. Costa Rica (7 files)
114. Cuba (12 files)
115. Dominican Republic (5 files)
116. El Salvador (54 files)
117. English-Speaking Caribbean (9 files)
118. French Caribbean (2 files)
119. Grenada (3 files)
120. Guatemala (19 files)
121. Haiti (19 files)
122. Honduras (14 files)
123. Jamaica (1 file)
124. Nicaragua (41 files)
125. Panama (23 files)
126. Puerto Rico (2 files)

South America

127. South America General (13 files)
128. Argentina (36 files)
129. Bolivia (12 files)
130. Brazil (33 files)
131. Chile (9 files)
132. Colombia (48 files)
133. Ecuador (8 files)
134. Guyana (2 files)
135. Paraguay (4 files)
136. Peru (42 files)
137. Suriname (5 files)
138. Uruguay (7 files)
139. Venezuela (9 files)

Total: 1564 files

Cataloguing of the Archive

For copyright and cost reasons it has not been possible to digitize the archive, even in part.

Hence a major challenge has been to devise a basic catalogue that can serve as a guide to the archive that both offers an overview and yet is sufficiently detailed to offer some sense of its contents. With very limited resources, the aim has been to produce an Excel Spreadsheet catalogue for researchers that is serviceable rather than totally comprehensive.

To that end, the 139 file groups have been preserved as the basic structure of organization. Each of these 139 file groups has been given its own named tab. Under that tab, all files relating to that file group appear. For each file there are 12 corresponding columns that run from left to right as follows:

1. Reference [i.e. the distinctive file number]
2. Title [often simply the country name: i.e. 'Italy']
3. Date [i.e. the time period this particular file covers]
4. Description [i.e. a thumbnail summaries of the contents of reports in that file: '12 people suspected of Bologna bombing' etc]
5. Language [that the news reports originally appeared in: often translations into English will accompany them]
6. Newspapers [where the reports appeared]
7. Groups/Individuals [i.e. detailing which actors these reports mention: IRA etc]
8. Incident [noteworthy events]
9. Type of Attack [such as shooting, bombing etc]
10. Type of Weapon [such as firearm, bomb, bladed weapon etc]
11. Type of Target [i.e. police officer, civilian etc]
12. Notes [i.e. Any Additional Information]

This basic template has been applied across all files. Not every single incident for every file has been recorded in the catalogue: but there is sufficient detail to give a prospective researcher an impression of each file's contents and its potential relevance for their project. Columns relating to types of attack, weapon and target are based upon Global Terrorism Database's templates. Since some files are concerned primarily with providing background social, political and economic context (rather than detailing violent incidents as such), these categorizations are not applicable across all files. In those cases, they have simply been left blank.

Accessing the Archive

Materials in the archive can be consulted at St Andrews University, courtesy of Special Collections. Since the archive is stored off-site, it is essential to pre-book your visit. The more warning you are able to give, the better.

Please email Special Collections: readroom@st-andrews.ac.uk

Further Background

The personal papers of Major-General Richard Clutterbuck are held at the Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge:

<https://archivesearch.lib.cam.ac.uk/repositories/9/resources/1489>